



## WORKPLACE TRAINING

# Ready to fight fire with fibre

Educators are looking forward to faster internet speeds and more opportunities for e-learning, writes **Sue White.**

**I**t's easy to imagine that training 6000 firefighters across a state the size of NSW might be a complex task. But the superintendent of Fire and Rescue NSW, Bob Alexander, knows some of the challenges firsthand.

"The issues of distance are enormous, and being able to train people appropriately is difficult," he says.

The solution, in part, is e-learning. "A large proportion of our training needs to be physical," Alexander says. "[But] we've tried to look at it laterally through e-learning packages."

Fire and Rescue NSW has teamed up with the Canberra Institute of Technology to develop specific e-learning components within its broader training programs. However, technological limitations in many regional areas have meant tasks such as streaming video to all students have proved challenging.

"One of the main issues is image quality," Alexander says. "To remotely train someone in [this] field, you need to be very accurate, so poor-quality video won't help."

Like many educators across Australia, Alexander hopes to make the most of the introduction of the optic-fibre, satellite and fixed wireless technology currently being rolled out as part of the federal government's National Broadband Network.

Already 10 regional fire captains, deputy captains and full-time station officers are ready to take part in a pilot project using the improved capabilities that it is claimed the NBN will bring to regional NSW.

"We have a fire-training facility in Armidale, [where] we'll construct a room for a scenario," Alexander says. "Some students will do a live assessment and it will be streamed to others in Kiama, who will observe via their laptops."

While 30 per cent of the network is expected to be rolled out within three years, the Coalition has vowed that, if it comes into power, it will cancel the NBN and introduce its own broadband scheme.

In the meantime, Fire and Rescue NSW's goal is to use new technology to provide higher-level training opportunities for its employees in regional areas. "We're starting with people who have got a fair degree of experience [already]," Alexander says.

Fire and Rescue NSW is not alone in looking online to enhance training needs. The chief executive of the vocational education and training (VET) sector's Flexible Learning Advisory Group, Raymond Garrand, says educators from all fields are embracing e-learning.

"E-learning has come a long way," he says. "In 2003, only 3 per cent of the VET sector had any major component of e-learning. Now, about 80 per cent has some component of it."

Like Alexander, Garrand sees the introduction of the NBN as a chance to further enhance training opportunities for those in regional areas. "It's partly about the reach," he says.

"It's also about bandwidth ... a lot of e-learning has videos or gaming technology embedded into it, so having [more] bandwidth is advantageous."

Equity and access are big issues for educators – issues that a lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney, Kirsty Young, knows well. Her research is focused on online learning, and she also does some teaching via distance education.

"There's a lot I'd like to do online but you can't do it," Young says. "With slow broadband, people are unable to download readings from the library – it takes a long time and they lose momentum – whereas those with high speed do it immediately and remain engaged with their learning."

Young says a national broadband network will open up what academics can do in the online classroom. But while she sees scope for teachers to use enhanced multimedia tools and engage experts to connect with students regardless of their location, she warns the NBN is not a quick fix.

"The dream is virtual classrooms with real-time engagement," she says. "[As the NBN rolls out] you can start trialling these things and see what works."

Like Young, Garrand doesn't believe enhanced e-learning is a golden bullet for the VET sector, which still relies heavily on practical training. But e-learning is a big part of the future, and not just because it might reduce costs.

"The greatest advantage is that it provides flexibility," he says.

"[Our surveys show] 85 per cent of employers want to make e-learning available to their staff."

"We're not moving to a world where everything will be done in e-learning, but ... a blended delivery offering greater flexibility for students and training providers."



Thinking big ... Fire and Rescue NSW's Bob Alexander hopes to make the most of the National Broadband Network. Photo: Domino Postiglione